

Dennis Hotel
Michigan Avenue & Boardwalk
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-862

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THE DENNIS HOTEL

Of the three hotels the Dennis is the oldest by virtue of its succession to the buildings constructed on the property acquired by William Dennis just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. After the war ended, the cottage was acquired by Joseph H. Borton, who extended it along Michigan Avenue. Although nothing of the original cottage survives, the early building had long lasting effects on the eventual hotel, determining by the location of its public rooms, the future development of the site. That first hotel was pictured in an engraving in Heston's Handbook of Atlantic City, 1892. It showed a three-story, L-shaped, frame structure with porches surrounding the Michigan Avenue front. The ell extended across the property and fronted on the lawn. The porches caused the volume of the hotel to be set back from the street, with the consequence that the later porchless Michigan Avenue extension did not line up with the earlier parts.

A part of this 1870's building still remained in 1978, attached to the hotel by a short spur wing, its set back from the demolished porches. Although the chamber partitions had been removed when the

rear wing was converted to storage spaces leaving only the corridor walls and the original doorways, enough survives to give a sense of the accommodations. Rooms were a generous fifteen feet deep, but varied in width from seven to fifteen feet, in accordance with late nineteenth century standards. The contemporary Congress Hotel in Cape May, New Jersey, for example, had bedrooms that averaged nine by twelve feet, a far cry from current casino hotel requirements. Finishes were simple -- sawed pine floors, plaster walls and ceilings, accented by broad, deeply shaped moldings around doors and windows.

In 1892, the Dennis was again extended by the Borton family. Documentary evidence and early views show two new wings, the longer extending along the Michigan Avenue facade and the other parallel to it and projecting at a right angle from the ell to frame the lawn. To provide visual unity a grand two level porch wrapped around the new wings as well as across the existing building. The new wings maintained the position of the old building, set back the depth of the porches from the street, and thus cannot be said to have fixed the position of the later Michigan Avenue wing. The shorter wing, bordering the Children's Home property, established the corridor line of the later intersecting wing of the first masonry addition of 1905.

Of greater significance than the placement of the new 1892 wings was their style, for instead of continuing the porch-fronted, largely astylar, vernacular mode, the architect developed a French chateau form which served as the basis for the hotel's future style. Subtly curving bays gave rhythm to the side and provided views of the ocean, while the end was embellished with a Francois I^{er} pediment above a series of projecting porches that terminated each of the guest floor corridors. The whole was surmounted by a high shingled roof punctuated by small dormers and accented by tall, flaring chimneys. Photographs taken during the construction of the 1905 wing show that the 1892 wings were covered with the shingles which were popular at the mountain resort of Asheville, North Carolina.

The arrangement of interior spaces, as evident from the exterior, placed lobbies, lounges and billiard rooms along the Michigan Avenue wing. Dining rooms were apparently at the rear of the site, served by kitchens in a back courtyard. With the new lobbies, public spaces and multi-level porches and balconies, the Dennis set a new standard of seashore hotel luxury. The first to be affected by the new standard was the Marlborough (more later) erected in 1901 on the site of the old Sacred Heart Academy. Four years later, Josiah White, owner of the Marlborough, acquired the property occupied for a generation by the Children's Seashore Home, and began the construction of a new reinforced concrete hotel, the Blenheim (more later). That new building had two major effects on the Dennis. First, it blocked the eastward views of the ocean that the low cottages of the Children's Home had not obstructed. Second, its fireproof construction represented the impact of the great fire of 1901 on hotels, making safety from the danger of fire a marketing feature.

The Dennis' new owner, Walter Buzby, responded to the challenge by hiring Philadelphia architect Walter Smedley to design a new fireproof wing that would extend the short 1892 wing to the boardwalk edge of the property. Walter Smedley, like Buzby, was a Quaker, and had trained in several Quaker architectural offices. He received a variety of commissions from the Society of Friends, including the prestigious Friends Hospital in Philadelphia, the Cooper Hospital in Camden and industrial buildings for Haines, Jones and Cadbury. Those structures brought him into contact with the new construction systems of the twentieth century. Work on the Dennis commenced in late September 1905, comprising a six story and basement wing of brick, steel, and reinforced concrete. By mid-October, it was announced that Thompson and Stiles of Atlantic City, were awarded the contract.

A photograph in the William L. Price archive, dated November 21, 1905, shows workmen laying brick walls of the hotel, while beyond rose the roof of the Blenheim. Two months later the rising walls were completed,

though with none of the decoration that would later encrust the surfaces. Above the masonry walls the first level of the steel framing of the mansard was clearly visible. Steel also framed the bays that projected between the structural masonry walls.

The motif already established in the 1892 Michigan Avenue wing, of an enlarged termination to an ocean wing, was followed by Smedley. Terra cotta sheathed the bays of the front block. Elaborate cast terra cotta ornamented the vertical stacks of corridor-ending porches, which were surmounted by a great French dormer, in the manner of the Michigan Avenue block. Massive quoins of brick and pilasters of the same material further enlivened and emphasized the wing.

Within the new wing, the entire space on all above ground floors, including the exchange, was devoted to guest chambers, presumably because the existing public facilities were adequate. But, despite the new structural system, the rooms were only slightly larger than those of the 1890's, sixteen feet deep and varying from ten to fifteen feet wide. The new innovation was the individual bathroom, which alternated with almost every guest room, thereby providing for greater privacy, corresponding to the tastes of the new metropolitan hotels. Still, the emphasis was on simplicity. The plainest of moldings frame doorways and windows and architectural ornament on the interior was generally eschewed. As in the early hotels, the 1906 wing encouraged the guest to make use of the lobbies and other public spaces.

Two features of the 1906 wing merit further comment: the elegant solarium which originally occupied the land adjacent to the boardwalk, and the tiny bedrooms within the mansard. The latter were of course the "servant" spaces of the hotel, providing mechanical spaces, but also housing the lower echelons of the hotel staff, continuing the pattern of reserving the least saleable spaces for the workers, a pattern which survived from older hotels along the Jersey shore. The solarium was more pleasant, a lacy confection of copper, glass and

masonry that provided access to the boardwalk, affording generous space and elevated position for the hotel guest. It was swept away by the remodeling of the hotel in 1929 when a new solarium was attached to the Michigan Avenue wing, and a new assembly room, the St. Dennis Room, occupied the site of the first solarium.

The fourth stage of the hotel began in the summer of 1910, again under the direction of Walter Smedley. Accounts in the Real Estate Record and Builders Guide indicate a six story wing, utilizing the same materials as the 1906 addition; brick, steel and reinforced concrete. Costs, originally estimated at \$300,000 in the July announcement, were later reduced to \$200,000 in late August, suggesting a cut-back in the work proposed. The later announcement also mentioned the award of the contract to Philadelphians Boydhouse and Arey. Later accounts indicate completion without specifying exactly what was accomplished. The best estimate, for the dollar value and symmetry, is that this work replaced and slightly extended the 1892 Michigan Avenue wing, presenting parallel masonry wings attached to a nineteenth century wood hotel.

Like the wing that it replaced, the first floor of the 1910 wing contained public spaces and broad corridors. The guest rooms above repeat the pattern of the 1906 wing, but are considerably more generous, 18 or 19 feet deep with a minimum width of 12'-6" and a maximum of 18 feet. Again, deep bays provided excellent views of the ocean and the lawns, while assuring ventilation. The alternating rhythm of bath and bed chamber was again continued, suggesting that such an arrangement generally met the requirements of the guests, despite the added cost. Here, as well as in the earlier wings, hot and cold fresh and sea water were provided the guests, the latter being a holdover from the days when salt water bathing was thought to be stimulating and restorative.

The next significant building program did not begin for nearly a generation; again Walter Smedley made plans, this time for a nine story connection between the earlier wings. With the new central pavilion, the hotel took the form that it would retain for the next half century, although two later additions in 1929 would extend the Michigan Avenue wing, and a new solarium and assembly room provide finishing touches. The new connection was of particular importance in that it provided facilities in a seashore hotel that rivaled those of the great urban hotels. A new two story lobby, with a great bay projecting into the lawn, gave proper grandeur to the building. Of interest, too, were such minor but important spaces as the new changing rooms that opened onto the balcony and recalled the provision for grand balls of the Bellevue Stratford in Philadelphia. Crowning the new building, additional multi-story public rooms offered elegance with splendid views of the ocean.

This new portion is of further interest, for it offered the first stylistic change in more than a quarter of a century, from the French chateau style to a rather more English mode. Perhaps the challenge of the neighboring Shelbourne or the national interest in Georgian Revival stimulated by the coming Sesquicentennial had an effect. At any rate, despite using similar though not identical brick and light stone trim, the crowning motif was not a high French roof, but rather a giant order, surmounted by a balustraded parapet of the eighteenth century sort. The same features embellished the lobby bay that projected into the lawn, giving a unity to the upper and lower levels of the building. The interior spaces, particularly the lobbies and the lower level interior corridors, followed up some of the English influence. Decorative plaster work on ceilings, pilasters and piers reflected the English sources. The spectacular "baroque" fireplace is curiously out of place, seemingly a refugee from the Florida development.

The last significant work phase occurred four years later in 1929, after Smedley's practice had ended. Another firm of Philadelphia

Quakers, Price and Walton, residents of Rose Valley, Pennsylvania and the son of William L. Price of Price and McLanahan (see below), were asked to make a seven story and basement addition to the Michigan Avenue wing. The 21 August 1929 announcement further noted that the materials would include brick, steel and reinforced concrete, continuing the hybrid system of the existing building. Three weeks later, the scope of work was amended to include new stores at the front, and it was announced that M. B. Mackland, contractor, of Atlantic City would be in charge.

The work envisioned the extension of the old Michigan Avenue wing another seventy feet towards the ocean, matching the length of the 1906 wing and making a symmetrical facade. The addition adopted the form of the earlier 1910 work and was merely grafted onto the existing wing, repeating the terminating features, large bays surmounted by elaborate terra cotta pediments. A comparison with the Smedley perspective of 1926 suggests repetition in the Price and Walton extension, with the exception of the curved porch that screened the lower two stories of the hotel. That, of course, became redundant when the new solarium was placed in front.

The new shops, surmounted on one side by the solarium and on the other by an assembly room, were noteworthy because they formed a new boardwalk facade for the hotel. The embellishment continued the basic French renaissance garb of the wings. However, unlike the relatively academic style of the Smedley work, the wit of the neighboring sea-inspired decoration of the Blenheim Hotel was clearly appreciated, perhaps in filial piety. Lobsters, turtles, dolphins, and other denizens of the deep are scattered across the limestone surfaces of the lower walls.

Additional changes have taken place during the past half century. Ralph B. Bencker, architectural successor to Price and McLanahan, made a num-

ber of alterations in 1930, including cabinetry, glazing and bronze work. Various public spaces have been updated as tastes have changed. More significant were the alterations to the exterior during the past generation. Some have resulted from Atlantic City's changed fortunes; the once stately lawns have been replaced by outdoor cafes. Moreover, the corrosive effects of the salt air had its impact on the exterior, forcing the replacement of the curving porches and pediments of the 1906 wing.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DENNIS

The Dennis Hotel is important as an architectural monument of a gracious and opulent era, and as a major element in the principal surviving portion of Atlantic City's Boardwalk front. Architecturally, the Dennis was less innovative than the neighboring Blenheim, in structure as well as form and decoration. However, its exterior, particularly in its relationship to the Boardwalk and to Michigan Avenue, is especially important, recalling as it does the patterns generated a century ago. In addition, various rooms, notably the public spaces, possess a charm that reiterates the themes of the exterior, and offers a significant aesthetic and environmental expression for the first half of the twentieth century.

Boardwalk Facade

Both the 1929 front pavilions have been preserved in essentially good condition. Exterior details, porches, pilasters and ornament remain and provide an appropriately scaled and styled transition from the Boardwalk to the mass of the hotel beyond.

The lawns, for which the hotel was greatly famed, are unfortunately in ruins. A variety of alterations have been made to the facade, with the most serious being the removal of the terra cotta porches and pediments of the 1906 wing, suggesting weathering of the more exposed surfaces. Presumably some effort should be made to weatherproof the

terra cotta if the hotel's deteriorated facade is to be preserved. The remainder is largely original, with copper flashings, terra cotta dormers and belt courses intact.

Michigan Avenue Facade

Various tasteless alterations have been made to the lower levels of the facade, but, in the main, the elevation is intact.

Interior

Because the hotel was built in an age when activity was concentrated in the public spaces of the hotel, and not in the private rooms, the architectural attention was concentrated on lobbies, entrance spaces and dining rooms, while comparatively little embellishment was given to the guest chambers and corridors.

Street Level Entrance

The principal entrance to the hotel leads from Michigan Avenue into a stately hall that opens on the right into a brightly lighted bay on the left into a tightly curved stair that leads to the Exchange Floor Lobby. Flattened groin vaults give unity to the hall and establish it as one of the hotel's important spaces.

Main Lobby

The travertine stair with curved landing of the entrance hall ascends to the largest of the hotel's public spaces, the balconied lobby or lounge. Its detailing reflects the polyglot nature of the exterior, having both an anglicizing decorative plaster ceiling and a baroque fireplace. The considerable height of the lobby is reduced by the balcony, which recalls the Bellevue Stratford. The balcony provides an aesthetic experience by raising the eye level to the height of the immense pier capitals, radically altering the sense of scale of the viewer. The total ensemble of entrance, lobby and balcony are the most important public spaces in the hotel.

Dining Room

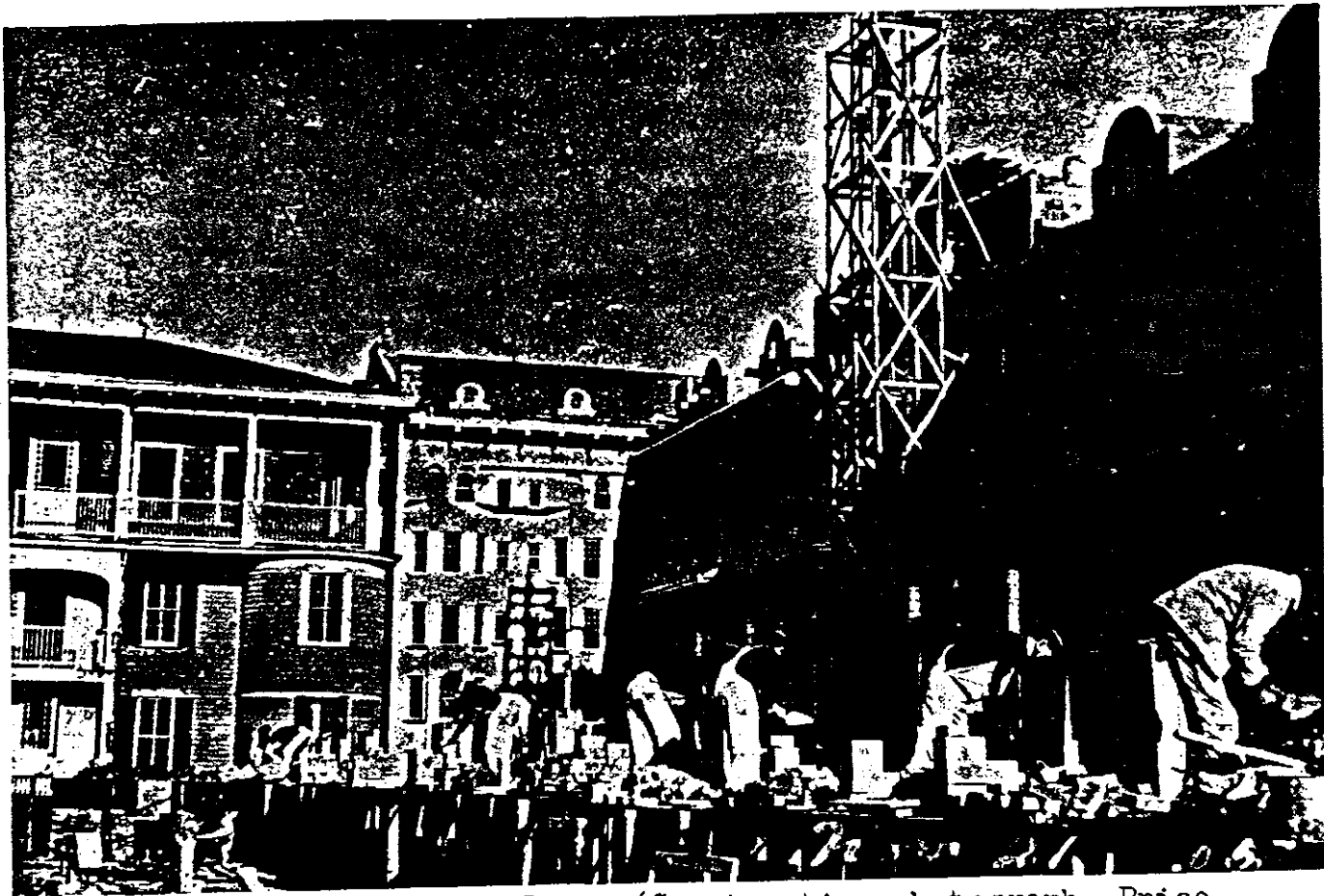
The dining room is a handsomely scaled elliptically vaulted columnar hall, opening onto an aisle on the Michigan Avenue side. Fan lights above the colonnade give the room a light open air, while preserving the sense of a great hall. At its end, the dining room is terminated by a flattened pannelled dome which was presumably glazed. Spaces such as these graced many of the great American hotels of the previous generation -- notably the Bellevue Stratford in Philadelphia, whose Stratford Garden and Burgundy Room set the regional standard imitated here.

Upper Level Assembly Room

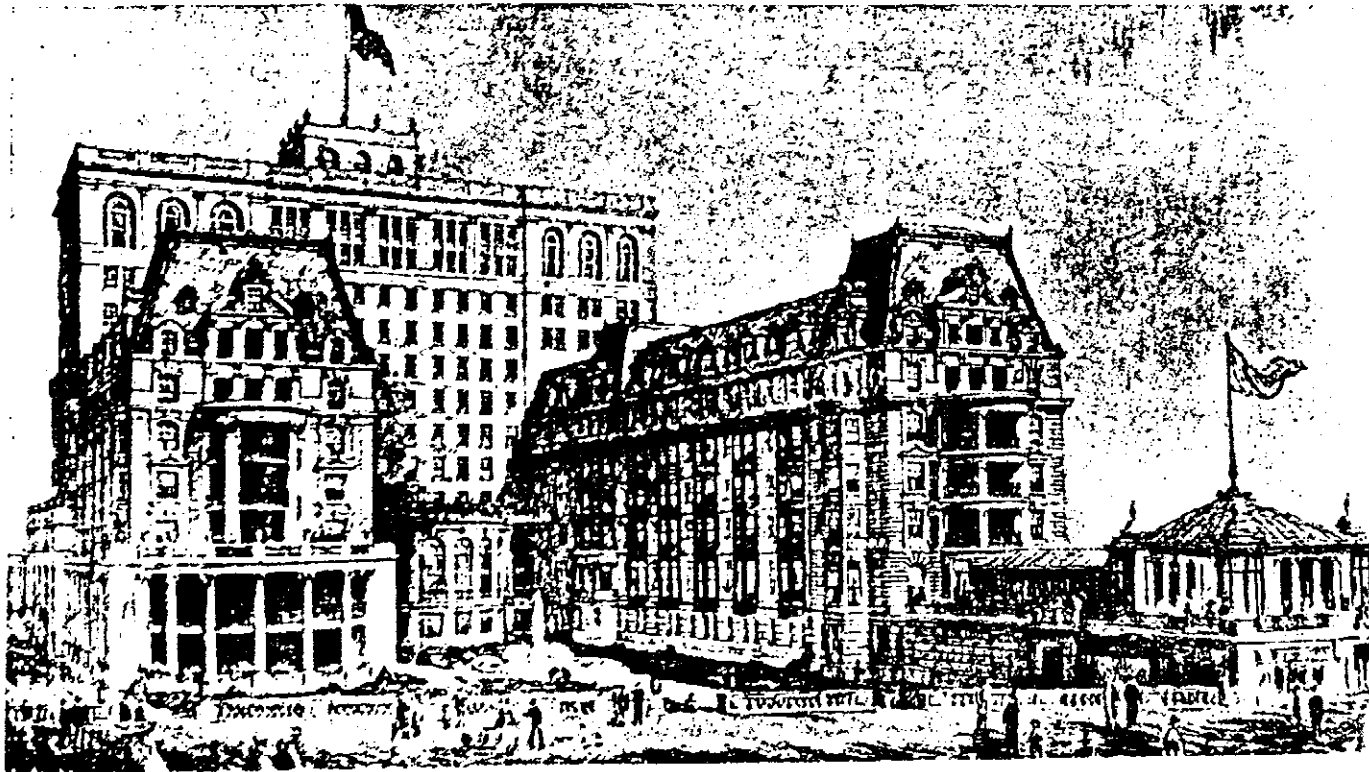
The 1926 tower was given a public suite decorated with the handsome generously scaled ornament common to the period.



Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City. (Post card, collection George E. Thomas: view of hotel showing 1892 wing on left and 1905 wing with original solarium on right).

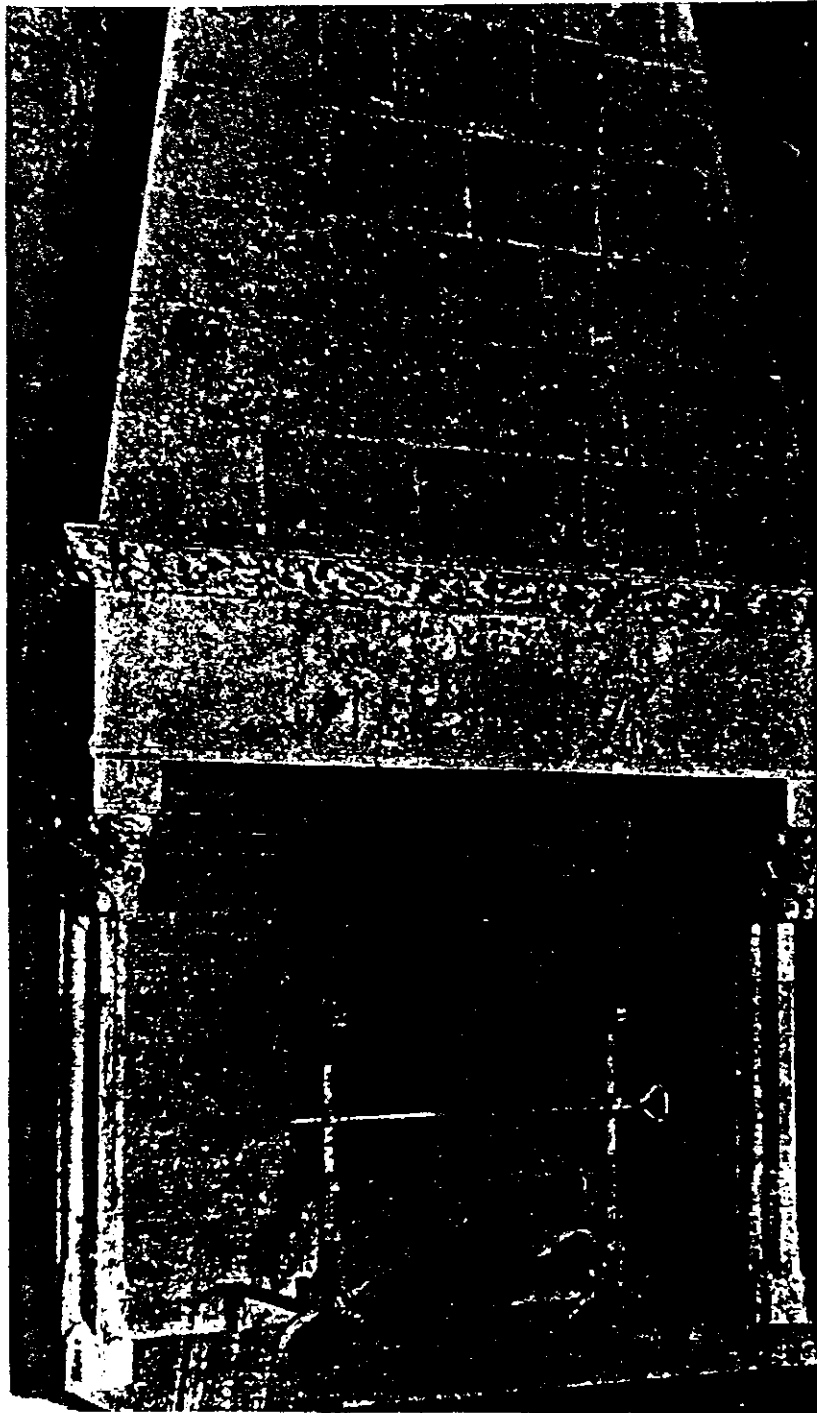


Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City. (Construction photograph, Price archive, collection George E. Thomas: masons laying walls of Dennis Hotel, showing 1892 wing at left, 21 November 1905).

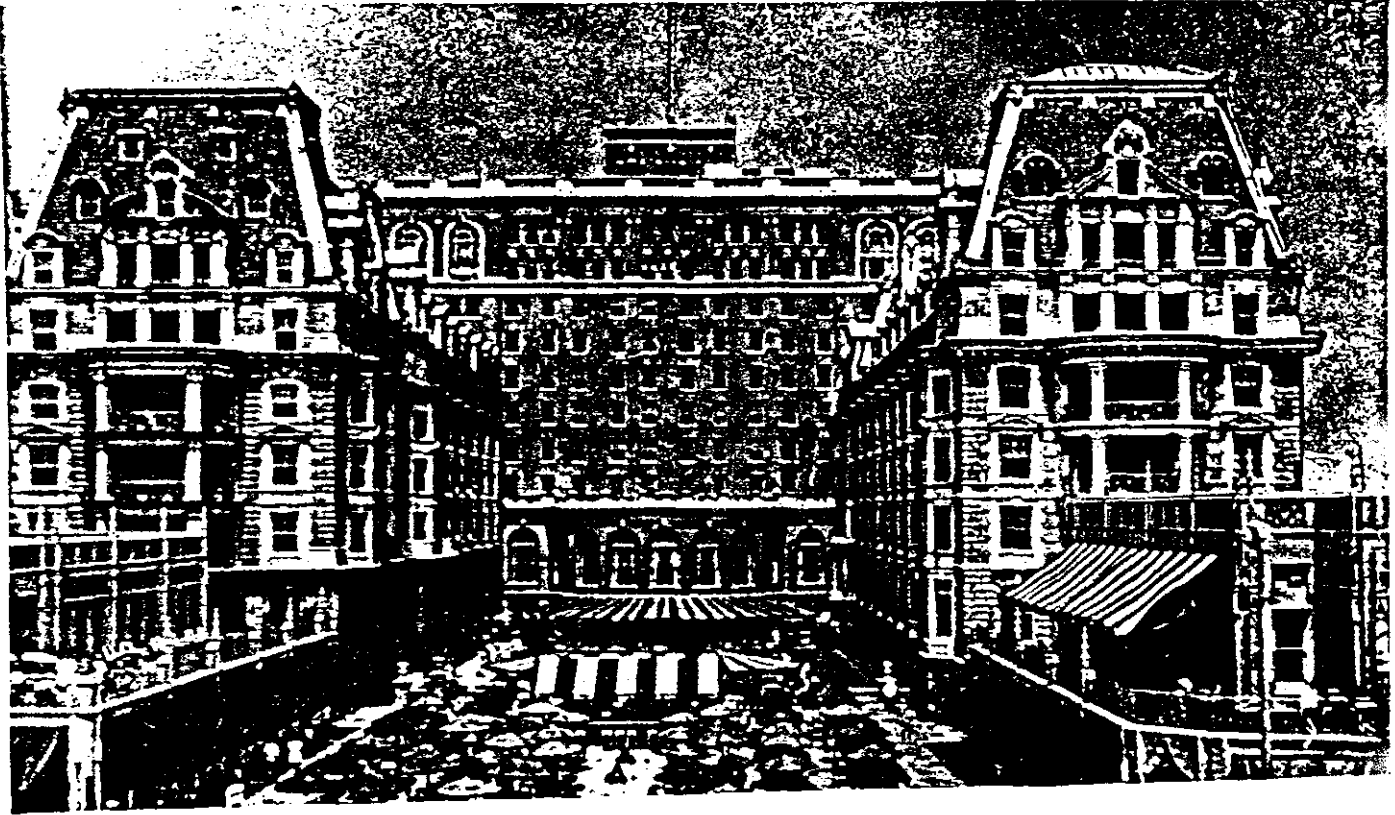


HOTEL DENNIS, ATLANTIC CITY, N. J.

Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City. (Perspective of hotel, by
Walter Smedley, from Philadelphia T Square Club
Annual, 1926).



Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City (St. Denis Room, fireplace by
Price and Walton, from T Square Club Annual, 1930).



Hotel Dennis, Atlantic City. (Post Card view c. 1960, prior to removal of terra cotta of 1905-6 wing).

For additional information see HABS NO. NJ-863 (MARLBOROUGH HOTEL).

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Addendum to:
Denis Hotel
Michigan Avenue and Boardwalk
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

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